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# Courage in the Holocaust

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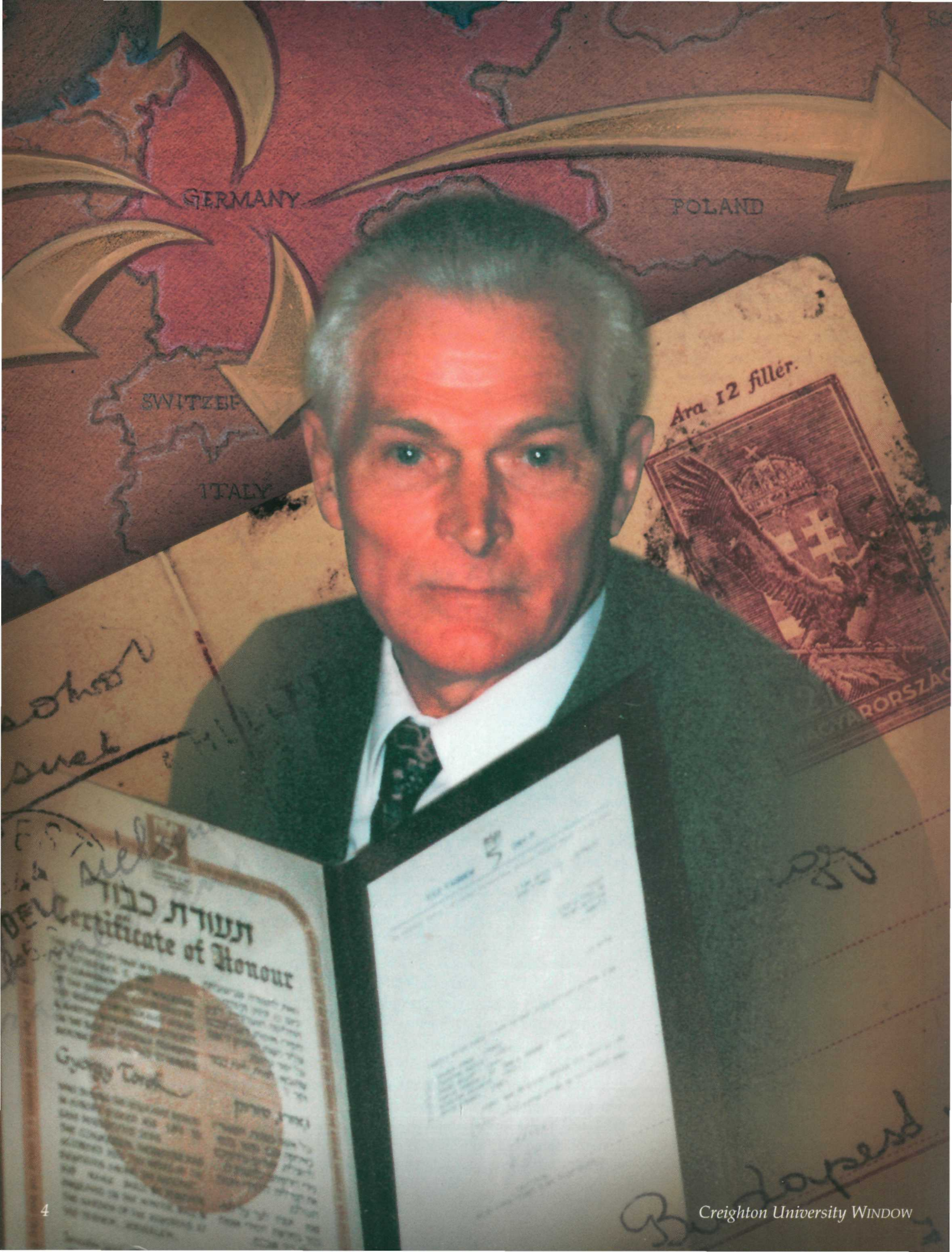
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# COURAGE IN THE HOLOCAUST

## *Finally, the Cosmic Tumblers Click In*

**By Lawrence Raful**
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In one of the important scenes in the movie "Field of Dreams," "The Voice" sends baseball fan and Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella east to meet reclusive writer Terrance Mann. When they meet, Ray tells Mann that he was inspired by the author's words: "There comes a time when all the cosmic tumblers have clicked into place and the universe opens itself up for a few seconds to show you what's possible." I enjoyed the quote when I first heard it a few years ago; now I've lived it. For a few hours this past spring, many of my thoughts and questions about the notion of "courage" came tumbling together and clicked into place, and I saw what was possible in the human spirit.

What were the pieces that fit together in the puzzle? It wasn't apparent at the time, but now I see that the pieces were not disjointed, but were moving together slowly and steadily, like the drifting continents, to form one larger jigsaw puzzle. My background as the son of a concentration camp survivor, my lectures in Legal Ethics classes about Dr. Stanley Milgram, a lecture by Dr. Ruth Purtilo, the movie "Schindler's List," my daughter's journey to visit the concentration camps in Poland, the celebration of my uncle as a Righteous Gentile, the 1944 postcard of a 19-year-old girl who was sent to a concentration camp; these were the pieces that "tumbled" together and clicked into place one night in April 1994, in Budapest, Hungary.

### *Legal Ethics and Stanley Milgram*

In addition to my administrative duties at Creighton, I have enjoyed, for a number of years

*What makes a King*
*out of a slave?*
*Courage!*
*What makes the flag*
*on the mast to wave?*
*Courage!*
*What makes the elephant*
*charge his tusk*
*In the misty mist,*
*or the dusky dusk?*
*What makes the muskrat*
*guard his musk?*
*Courage!*
*What makes the*
*Sphinx the*
*seventh wonder?*
*Courage!*
*What makes the*
*dawn come up*
*like thunder?*
*Courage!*
*What makes the*
*Hottentot so hot?*
*What puts the "ape"*
*in apricot?*
*What have they got*
*that I ain't got?*
*Courage!*

*--Zeke, the Cowardly Lion,*
*from the original script of*
"The Wizard of Oz"

*At right, the "interrogators" in Dr. Stanley Milgram's psychological experiments often took their "subjects" to the top level of "pain" in their attempts to follow the orders they were given by Milgram. Here, an interrogator forces the subject's hand onto the fake electric plate to administer the highest level of "shock."*

now, teaching the required course in Legal Ethics. It is a pleasure to get to know students as a teacher rather than just as an administrator.

I have learned that I can count on students to ask each year the same difficult question: "What should we do if the partner in our law firm tells us to do something that we feel is unethical?" I have over the years fashioned an answer which attempts to help the students understand that there is a response between the two extremes of resigning in protest or simply accepting the partner's directive for fear of losing their jobs. We talk about how to act ethically and sensibly, and why taking the ethical route may not necessarily lead to a dismissal from employment.

My attempt to find further answers to that question led me to the work of Dr. Stanley Milgram, a member of the Department of Psychology at Yale University. In the late 1950s he became interested in the stories he had heard from survivors of the Nazi concentration camps. Specifically, he focused on those who worked in the death camps, and why they obeyed orders to exterminate millions of innocent victims. He wondered why people obeyed authority to this extreme end.

Milgram wanted to take a closer look at obedience to authority and he set up a simple experiment at Yale University. A "subject" comes to a psychology laboratory and is told to carry out a series of acts that come increasingly into conflict with his conscience. This "interrogator" sits at an impressive looking electric shock generator and asks questions of a student, although in reality the shock generator is fake and the student, attached to a fake "electric plate," is an actor. The subject is told that he or she is part of an experiment on learning, and when the "student" makes a mistake, the subject must administer increasingly higher electric shocks. The main question is how far the subject will go to comply with the experimenter's instructions before refusing to carry them out.

The results of the test were diametrically opposed to what Milgram and a group of psychologists had predicted. Rather than all subjects "breaking off" the experiment well before they

*In photo at right, taken during World War II, Raful's mother Zsuzsi (second from right) is shown with her twin sister Edit (left) and another sister, Mary (second from left). At the right is first cousin Zsuzsi, who died in a Nazi concentration camp. In the picture, the four are hiding their Jewish stars, which the Nazi occupiers required all Jews to wear and display.*

believed they were administering a dangerous level of electric shock, 26 of the 40 subjects in the first test administered the shock to the maximum, to a level they were told was dangerous. Vocal protests were added by the fake test victim, but 25 of the next 40 "experimenters" administered the entire test. Similar results were obtained even when the subject was in the same room as the "victim," and, when the subject had to physically hold the victim's hand to the electric plate, 12 of 40 subjects were prepared to administer the maximum level of shock.

Professor Milgram hoped to explain why certain participants broke off the experiment, why they disobeyed. Milgram believed that disobedience is a general form of strain, and if the strain is sufficiently powerful it will lead first to dissent then to disobedience. While dissent refers to the subject's expression of disagreement with the course of action, disobedience is the ultimate means whereby strain is brought to an end. Professor Milgram believed that disobedience is an act that does not come easily.

There are, of course, enormous differences between carrying out the orders of a commanding officer during times of war and carrying out the orders of a scientist in an experiment (or of a partner in a law firm). Yet certain relationships remain, and one may ask how does a person behave when told by a legitimate authority to act against the third individual? That is, perhaps, the most fundamental lesson of the study: Ordinary people, doing their jobs, and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terribly destructive process. They do not become angry. Something far more dangerous is revealed: the capacity for people to abandon their own humanity.

My students' reaction was powerful and immediate to the Milgram lecture and to a videotape of a Milgram experiment. Students were stunned, I think, by the apparent cruelty of the subjects, especially in that the cruelty was impersonal and without anger or passion. Did it mean that they might become such actors in the law firm setting? It certainly gave them pause to think about obedience to authority in the practice of law.

*Above, Raful's mother Zsuzsi (Suzy) is shown at right with her twin sister Edit, 10 (left), and her older sister Mary, 12 (center). The picture was taken in 1935.*

*Dr. Ruth Purtilo*

## *Dr. Ruth Purtilo and "Courage"*

For many years I concentrated on the "how" of that student question: "How should I act?" But a few years ago I was privileged to hear, at an Omaha medical-legal dinner, a lecture by Dr. Ruth Purtilo, one of this country's leading experts on ethical behavior and a member of the Center for Health Policy and Ethics at Creighton. Dr. Purtilo is a splendid and thoughtful speaker, and her lecture that night concentrated on the notion that we don't use the word "courage" much anymore. Dr. Purtilo described courage as growing from a "seed," a powerful action that is a reaction to fear or threats. In her view, there is a difference between courage and moral courage, in that moral courage assists a "publicly recognized and worthwhile goal." She urged lawyers and doctors to display moral courage to help heal the problems of our country.

I realized that I had only scratched the surface with my students, for while I talked to them about "how to act," I had not discussed with them the "where" of that question: from where does the strength to act come? I had put the cart before the horse, because you first must decide to act before deciding what you will do. I understood then that the discussion with students needed to start with a focus on personal courage, and this helped me focus my class lectures about obedience to authority and Dr. Milgram's experiments.

*Below, in a photo taken July 9, 1945, Raful's mother is 20, his dad, 22, then an American soldier. They met after the war at a relocation center for concentration camp survivors.*

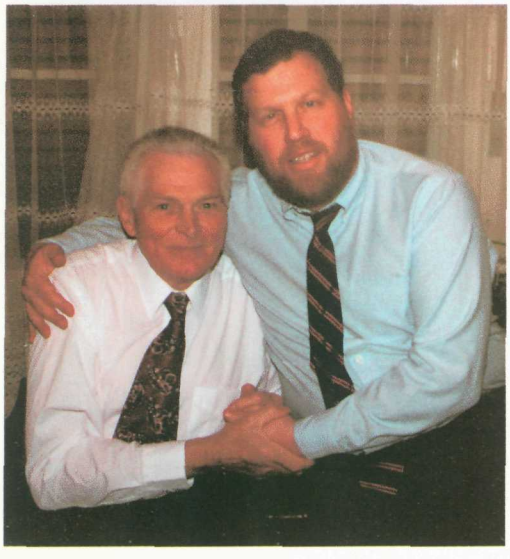
## *"Schindler's List" and Sarah Raful's Travels*

Think back to this past spring, to the release across the country of the movie "Schindler's List." I certainly was not prepared for the overwhelming reaction to the film by people of all ages, races, religions, economic strata, etc. I had assumed that the movie would have a very limited viewing audience, due to the intense and horrific subject matter, and would close in cities like Omaha after only a week or two in the theater. Much to my surprise, the movie was a blockbuster here and across the country. More importantly, it provoked great discussions about the Holocaust and the courage of this person acting alone.

Students this year, during my annual "Milgram" lectures, certainly wanted to bring Schindler into the discussion. What would he have done in the Milgram experiment, they wondered? And would the "early" Schindler have performed differently than the Schindler we saw at the end of the movie? And, if so, why? What experience did he have that might have caused him to break off the Milgram experiment, much as he had "broken off" the Hitler "experiment?"

And on top of all of the Schindler discussion this past spring, our eldest daughter Sarah, now 16, was selected to participate in The March of the Living, which brings together 5,000 youth, Jewish and Christian, from across the world, to spend a week in Poland learning first-hand about the concentration camps, and then a week in Israel visiting many religious and historical sites. Sarah participated in The March, so titled because as part of the program the participants recreate the two-mile "death march" from

Auschwitz to Birkenau. She did so soon after watching "Schindler's List," and she stood in the places where Schindler and his people stood,



***Uncle Gyuszi and Raful.***

making the experience even more electric.

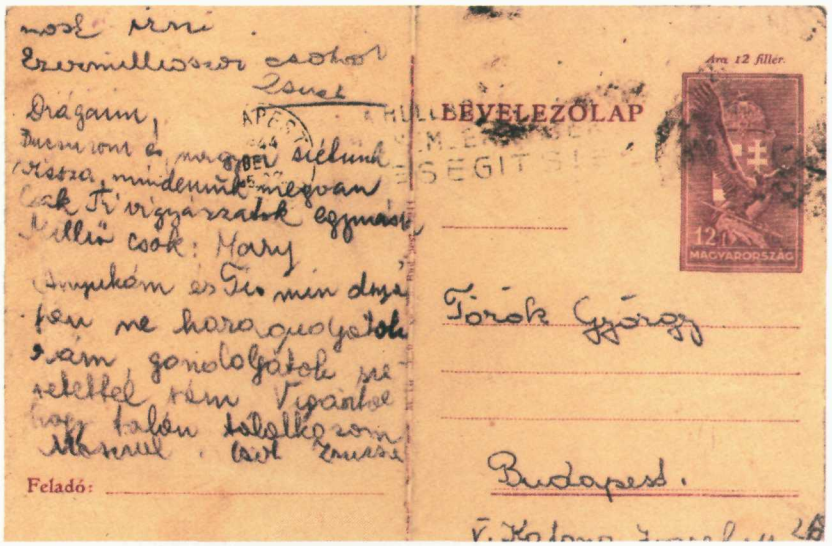
Because my mother is a concentration camp survivor, originally from Budapest, Hungary, the trip was even more meaningful for our entire family, and Sarah's experience was monumental and terrifying. Before she left, she had watched with me the Milgram tape, and at first found the results hard to believe. After walking through the ruins of the camps, after viewing hundreds of thousands of suitcases, shoes, overcoats, and pairs of glasses, she thought the experiment was perfectly believable, because she had witnessed the ultimate evidence of man's abandonment of humanity.

## *Uncle Gyuszi and the Postcard*

At the close of Sarah's trip to Poland and Israel, she flew to Budapest to meet my wife Dinah and me. We were there to represent our

*Above, Sarah Raful is shown at the Umschlagplatz Memorial in Warsaw. This was the boarding point for ghetto residents to transfer to Auschwitz. The Memorial contains all the common first names of Jews who passed through this terminal. She is looking at the name "Sarah."*

*Postcard at right was thrown from a train destined for a Nazi concentration camp. On one side was message from Raful's mother, Zsuzsi: "My dear Gyuszi! We are writing in the cattle car. Gyuszi, all the best, God bless you. Take good care of mom and Edit. Love us very much and perhaps one day we shall meet again. We cannot write to mom separately, so I say goodbye here now. Dear mom, dad! I can hardly write, but be very strong and then one day maybe we'll meet again. We love you so much. Thousand-million kisses, Zsuzsi." On the front of the card (shown) was the message from sister, Mary, and first cousin Zsuzsi (the latter died in the camp): "My dears, Goodbye and we'll hurry back. We have everything we need, only you should take care of each other. Million kisses, Mary. "Mom and all of you, don't be angry with me, think with love of me. Kiss, Zsuzsi." No one knows who found or mailed the card, but it was delivered to Gyuszi even though the city was by then under German occupation. It is stamped Budapest, Dec. 22, 1944, 5 a.m.*




family at a truly historic moment. My Uncle Gyuszi, a non-Jew who married my mother's twin sister Edit, was awarded the Medallion of the Righteous Gentile by Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Museum and Authority in Jerusalem. While he had always declined to discuss his actions with us over the years, we had heard stories that Gyuszi had saved many people, Jewish and non-Jewish, during the war, and finally his courage and bravery were to be honored. He is a humble and stoic man, a person of few words, and for many years he had declined to be so honored. But the family finally prevailed upon him and the moment was at hand on a glorious evening at the Budapest Opera House!

That ceremony was wonderful, but for us the crowning moment came the next evening, when we all assembled in my cousin's apartment for a farewell dinner. Perhaps because the ceremony had passed, Uncle Gyuszi decided to answer our questions about what he did in the war, and we listened for three hours to his tales of the horror he saw and the actions he took. Gyuszi told the stories in a slow, soft voice, stories of smuggling mail, food and cigarettes to work camps early in the war, and moving people to safe houses and helping others escape death camps at the close of the war. He described the daily terror in the streets and the random, commonplace executions by police and army officers.

We continually interrupted him with questions of "Why did you do it?" and "How did you find the strength and courage?" He felt he had done nothing out of the ordinary, and did not feel comfortable with the mantle of "hero" that we attempted to place around his shoulders. He was not a religious man, he had not grown up in an atmosphere which might foster such action, and he did not feel any particular faith in a higher being. He simply did what he thought was right.

Then he showed us something I had never seen before, a postcard from December 1944. On it was the unmistakable handwriting of my mother, and he told me that, like many Jews, she


***Edit and Gyuszi with certificate recognizing Gyuszi's heroism.***

had written it on the train to the concentration camp and had tossed it out the door, hoping that some kind soul would pick it up and mail it.

The text, addressed to her parents, was bittersweet: "Dear mom, dad! I can hardly write, but be very strong and then one day maybe we'll meet again. We love you so much."

Sarah held the postcard, realizing the enormity of the moment. She had just visited the camps and now she held in her hands the card her grandmother had written on the day she left thinking she would die.

Uncle Gyuszi started to shed tears, the first I had seen from him in my lifetime.

And he said a curious thing.

He had seen "Schindler's List" and he said the movie was like his life. He hadn't started out being brave; he only was trying to help a friend, a Jewish friend, get some food and cigarettes and mail from his parents. He started out only by doing little things, insignificant things, simple things, and little by little they grew into the actions he took that resulted in saved lives and the Righteous Medallion. Schindler started by helping in little ways, insignificant ways, and he, too, was awarded the Righteous Medallion for what he later accomplished.

And then it finally all came together for me, the cosmic tumblers clicking into place.

After Legal Ethics and Milgram and Purtilo, after Sarah and Gyuszi, I still didn't know exactly where personal courage came from, but I learned that it doesn't come upon you instantly, in a blinding light. Courage starts slowly and is small, and usually involves, I think, insignificant and routine acts. It is not a reaction to passion, not like Purtilo's moral courage, but it is from the same seed she described, growing slowly and building into something strong and important.

And I realized that there was the message for my students. They ask "What should we do?" And the answer is that if they haven't led a life of small, routine courage, they certainly can't expect to be brave and have courage to do the right thing the moment the partner asks them to do something unethical. From the moment they start practicing law, they must make sure that each day is filled with small acts of courage, insignificant acts of courage, perhaps even silent acts of courage. This seed will grow, and they will be prepared for the day they need large, immediate, important courage.

*Above, Gyuszi at age 20. The photo was taken near Budapest.*

The students ask if we all have courage. Is it a gift from God? Purtilo thinks so and so does my mother. Uncle Gyuszi is not sure, but Sarah thinks so. And I think so, too.

All of us have personal courage inside of us, a seed ready to grow slowly and steadily if we will listen to that still, small voice.

After all, even the Cowardly Lion found courage where he least expected it: within himself. W

*(Footnote - The author thanks Anna Raful for her research assistance, Prof. Erwin Chemerinsky for his insight on Stanley Milgram, and Dr. Ruth Purtilo for her comments and criticisms of this article.)*